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SUBJECT: FRANCE-RUSSIA RELATIONS: DIALOGUE IS KEY

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Kathleen
Allegrone for Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

NOTE: This cable replaces and corrects PARIS 02166.

¶1. (C) The France-Russia relationship has been rather turbulent since France assumed the rotating EU presidency in July. The short August war between Georgian and Russian troops heightened tensions in the region and presented President Sarkozy with the perfect opportunity to showcase both his diplomatic skills and his campaign promise to be tough on Moscow. Time, pressure from European allies, and the French President's desire to score diplomatic victories, however, have conspired to push Paris's policy on Russia away from the robust, "hold Russia accountable" attitude trumpeted at the beginning of the Presidency to a more lenient, almost "business as usual" -- as much as French officials deny it -- approach. This evolution in French policy threatens to allow continued Russian intransigence on matters such as the cease-fire in Georgia, missile defense and other European Security issues. French officials do not tire of asserting that dialogue is the best -- if not the only -- way to deal with Moscow's obstinate approach to many foreign policy issues even as they admit that Europe's growing influence in Russia's neighboring countries means Russia may convince Moscow to be more cooperative. End Summary

Sarkozy's Evolving Policy

¶2. (C) The Elysee was undoubtedly up in arms after reading an opinion piece in the latest edition of French newsweekly "Le Nouvel Observateur" that detailed the ways in which Sarkozy's Russia policy has changed. The article cites Sarkozy's declaration at a conference in Evian in October that Moscow had carried through on all the cease-fire commitments previously agreed to as a symbol that France and Europe could return to business as usual with Russia -- including resumption of negotiations on an EU-Russia Partnership agreement. It quoted a Russian official as saying: "Sarkozy did exactly what we were hoping by essentially giving France's blessing for the annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. France, today, is Russia's best friend in Europe." This, the article concludes, shows just how accommodating Sarkozy has become since he became the president of France.

¶3. (C) French officials have responded to Embassy inquiries about this article in various ways. Damien Loras, Sarkozy's key advisor at the Elysee on Russia and the Americas, said that the Nouvel Observateur journalist had actually called to apologize for the article, which came across as more critical than she intended. While it is true that Sarkozy went too far in his praise for Russia in the press conference following the EU-Russia summit, Loras continued, we need to focus on what Sarkozy actually said in the meetings with Medvedev and during a press conference in Washington on November 20. MFA A/S equivalent for Continental Europe Roland Galharague separately observed that in both cases Sarkozy, who emphasized that Russia has not fulfilled the promises it made in the August and September cease-fire

agreements, was demonstrating more of the "tough love" approach he generally takes towards Russia. Galharague echoed Loras when he said that he thought very little had actually changed in Sarkozy's approach to Russia and that journalists were simply looking for an interesting story and not necessarily reflecting reality. Galharague said he saw little in private to fuel the public perception that Paris was ready to move closer to Moscow.

14. (C) Parenthetically, Galharague confirmed that Sarkozy was using his own script with Medvedev, noting that with all due respect to his Elysee colleague, Sarkozy did not follow the instructions his advisors give him. (Comment: Russia is far from the only subject area about which we have heard this critical observation. End Comment.) He also said that Sarkozy approaches many of these matters "politically" rather than as a diplomat would, i.e., without considering all the nuances in a given subject or caring about its historical evolution.

15. (C) Another MFA official, DAS equivalent for Russia and the CIS countries Alexandre Vulic, seemed to agree that Sarkozy has moved from a more skeptical and critical posture to one that seemed to be more pragmatic. While emphasizing that this was his personal opinion, Vulic said that Sarkozy's diplomacy toward Russia is partly motivated by a desire for a "success story." This was especially evident during the Georgia conflict. Vulic also noted a rhetorical toning down of public references to Russia, which had initially been much more stark and critical. Sarkozy has become more pragmatic towards the Russians, Vulic concluded: he clearly prefers working with Russia to confronting it and wants to move the relationship forward while taking into account events on the ground in places like Georgia. Vulic opined, however, that Sarkozy, like the rest of the GOF, is still making up its mind about Medvedev to determine whether he will be a hardline leader or one more receptive to change. Vulic concluded that France's position towards Russia, especially once it is no longer the EU president, will continue to develop. He credits German pressure on Sarkozy to tone down his attitude toward Russia as being a key external influence driving the current tendency toward pragmatism, and said that Paris will continue to look to Germany's approach towards Russia. This does not mean that France will do everything that Germany does or wants, but Paris, position on Russia could be more heavily influenced by Berlin than it even is currently.

Dialogue, not Confrontation, Will Reduce Intransigence

16. (C) French officials do not seem concerned that Sarkozy's morphing attitudes towards Moscow will allow Moscow's intransigence on issues like Georgia, European Security and missile defense to continue. Every official at the Elysee and MFA, regardless of rank or title, emphasized that dialogue, rather than confrontation, is the best way to get Moscow to cooperate more. Russia cannot and should not be pushed "off-stage" at this point, Damien Loras said. The EU has to continue moving forward on a partnership agreement with the Russians because it cannot base its relationship with Russia solely on August's events in Georgia. Besides, Loras continued, meetings such as the EU-Russia summit give France and the EU the opportunity to encourage Russia in the right direction, as France did when it complimented the Russian delegation in Nice on Moscow's efforts to resolve the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh. Such diplomacy, the French emphasized, would be immensely helpful in resolving the situation with Georgia. Vulic also emphasized the importance of dialogue with the Russians, although when we asked how the French planned to make the Russians follow through on all cease-fire components, Vulic answered rather uncertainly that "we will simply have to keep reminding the Russians that they have not completely complied with the cease-fire agreements" until Moscow acts.

17. (C) Continued dialogue and interaction with Moscow is especially important on issues like Missile Defense and

Russia's proposal for a European security treaty, and also help to explain Sarkozy's desire for an OSCE summit sometime during 2009. Loras said that we should not expect any spectacular developments from the OSCE summit Sarkozy has proposed. France's intention for such a summit is really to take control of Medvedev's plan for a European security architecture so that Russia cannot try to use such a format to divide Europe or create an organization of which Moscow is in charge.

18. (C) Dialogue is also increasingly crucial, Vulic said, because France and Europe are becoming progressively more important in the area that Moscow considers its "sphere of influence." Russia can be a difficult partner, Vulic added, but it also recognizes that the EU is a major player in its neighborhood. The Kremlin has realized that it lost a lot of ground with its neighbors (i.e., CIS members) during the war with Georgia, which gives France and the EU more opportunities to compete for influence in Russia's "near abroad." Constructive dialogue will help Russia understand that democracy and cooperation with Europe will not pull countries like Ukraine away from Russia but will make them stronger and more secure, which will, in turn, increase Russia's security.

Comment

19. (C) Sarkozy's Russia policy reflects his penchant for pragmatic relationships that benefit France and highlight his own skills as a politician and deal-maker. His personal vision of what security, stability, and other aspects of good bilateral relationships include is evident not just in his desire to confront tense situations head on but also in his determination to forge productive relationships even with those others may consider beyond the pale. In that respect, Sarkozy has dealt with Russia in a manner similar to his approaches that towards Syria, Libya, and China. The year 2008 opened with a high profile -- and risky -- initiative with Syria over Lebanon and will end with considerable attention focused on his controversial determination to resist pressure from other EU countries to restrict or close off engagement with Russia. In each instance, Sarkozy set out from a position that could be considered unyielding in its demands for the other country's behavior, and in each case, when faced with the opportunity to stick to that hard position or engage in dialogue with that country (with some clear benefit to his and France's prestige), Sarkozy chose the latter. By doing this, Sarkozy has effectively recanted one of his campaign promises related to foreign policy: he is making diplomacy personal and taking it upon himself to get the diplomatic job done. This tendency to prefer to do it himself at the level of the summit rather than rely on his diplomatic establishment or even his advisors is becoming a hallmark and has eroded his follow-through on his other foreign policy commitment to pursue a more "moral" foreign policy. Additionally, the change in Sarkozy's position towards Russia seems to point to his desire to remain at the forefront of the EU's efforts to figure out the best way to deal with a resurgent Russia. Sarkozy's endeavors both to work with Russia as a whole and Medvedev personally may, therefore, be attempts to maneuver himself into a leadership role that he hopes to maintain after the EU presidency passes to the Czech Republic in January. End comment
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